Essays in Philosophy

Volume 8
Issue 2 *Civil Disobedience*

Article 12

6-2007

# Review of "Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry"

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Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 8, No. 2, June 2007

# Book Review

*Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry*, by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Translated by Jeff Fort. University of Illinois Press, 2007. notes, index. 111 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-03153-3, $35.00.

Lacoue-Labarthe writes in his preface that this collection "retraces the history of an 'apprenticeship' or the experience of a gradual—and sometimes difficult—understanding" (1). The texts, "written and reworked" over a period of twelve years, from 1990-2002, grow out of earlier work that begins with the question "Whence Heidegger's scandalous political engagement, at the time of Nazism and *in* Nazism?" transformed gradually into "How is it that, at bottom, a certain idea of History, and consequently of art, provided a more and more explicit authorization and foundation for this engagement?" In the process of writing and reworking the texts, Lacoue-Labarthe comes, finally, to formulate the question as "Why is Heidegger's interpretation of poetry—if we recognize that for him art is in fact essentially Poem—scandalous to such a degree?" (1). The difficulty of the apprenticeship derives for Lacoue-Labarthe from the fact that, because Heidegger was in question, "it gravely undermined an admiration that, nevertheless, somehow still remained intact—as though through a strange 'schizophrenia' whose origin and persistence have to this day not ceased to trouble me. To say the least" (1).

Given Heidegger's influence on philosophy and his membership in the Nazi party between 1933 and 1945, Lacoue-Labarthe's difficult apprenticeship is an apprenticeship through which any post-Heidegger thinker who wishes to seriously engage Western philosophy must, to some degree, pass. Even if we do not single out Heidegger (and the trajectory of Lacoue-Labarthe's reformulations already suggests this), we do, to the extent that we take upon ourselves the task (as Alain Badiou put it in an exchange with Lacoue-Labarthe) of "*thinking the 1930s*" (81), struggle with the complicity of philosophy and philosophers in political atrocities that define the twentieth century. To say the least.

To say more, we might extend the question to other times, other places, other atrocities. The point is to take philosophy seriously enough to trace its political ramifications in philosophically disciplined ways. If philosophy matters, it contributes to our lives together, and tracing the contributions (positive and negative) is important. More to the point, with reference to these essays, the philosophical question is for aesthetics and, especially, for poetry.

Lacoue-Labarthe is aware that the question of Heidegger and poetry has been the subject of extensive discussion, and he does not presume to treat it exhaustively in this little collection: "Nothing," he promises, "will be covered here" (2). *Covering* nothing is one of the collection's virtues. Lacoue-Labarthe's direct, often schematic, approach to a subject with which he was intimately engaged, uncovers possibilities that invite the kind of disciplined argument philosophy should be about. While we read and benefit from discussion of Heidegger's engagement with Hölderlin's poetry, we are also alerted to the

"suturing" of philosophy and politics that preceded it and coincided with Heidegger's acceptance of the Rectorship at Freiburg that marked his most public involvement with Nazism. And Lacoue-Labarthe directs our attention to the shift that has sometimes been read as a suturing of philosophy to the poem that marked his withdrawal from the Rectorship and his distancing himself from direct involvement with Nazism. But Lacoue-Labarthe, drawing on Benjamin and Adorno, gives this a subtle and illuminating turn.

In the first place, he argues, the Poem, for Heidegger, is a mytheme (11). So the "suture" does not join poetry and philosophy so much as it joins philosophy and myth, a conjunction that plays disastrously into the hands of Nazi ideology. In the second place, the suturing that Heidegger effects in his "withdrawal" from Nazism is not a suturing of philosophy to the poem so much as a "suturing to the political of philosophy's suturing to the Poem" (23). Since the Poem is a mytheme for Heidegger, the withdrawal is not a separation from politics. It is, more properly, a step back to a more fundamental level —not from politics to poetry but from politics as poetry to Myth. And, while there is some distancing involved, this is no separation. It is, if anything, a more pervasive connection that grounds politics through poetry in Myth. Badiou speaks of Heidegger "handing philosophy over to poetry" (22), but Lacoue-Labarthe sees it as handing philosophy and poetry together over to Myth—and that is what makes Heidegger, though not simply a Nazi, the thinker of National Socialism (83).

What is so scandalous about Heidegger's reading is the extent to which it makes him think National Socialism precisely in the process of thinking the *unthought* of it. And Lacoue-Labarthe's singular contribution in these essays is his account of it as a withdrawal from National Socialism that, like every withdrawal, "traces and draws out that from which it withdraws" (84). "Political disavowal," he writes, "is the touchstone of fascism." But this does not make Heidegger apolitical or anti-political. Lacoue-Labarthe maintains that "The disavowal of the political in Heidegger is made in the name of the essence or origin of the political" (84). It is a stepping back from the unreflective practice of politics to its ontological underpinning. Withdrawing from the explicit practice of politics, Heidegger turns to its mythological ground in the Poem (particularly the Poem of Hölderlin), to what Lacoue-Labarthe calls "archi-fascism" (84). This is scandalous not simply because it is Heidegger but because the turn Heidegger makes exposes National Socialism as "the fulfillment of the Western history of *techne*" (85). And Heidegger never repudiated National Socialism. He said he was "disappointed" by it.

That, for Lacoue-Labarthe as for Celan, is staggering.

For both, as poets, a key dimension of the problem is the "overinterpretation" of the poem. For poets, Heidegger's first offense is taking it upon himself to impose a task on poetry that puts it simply in the service of politics and philosophy. Withdrawn into unthought, it is condemned to unthinking. And that may be read as an abandonment of the essential work of the poet.

Lacoue-Labarthe traces the historical development of National Socialism out of German Romanticism. To call National Socialism the fulfillment of the Western history of *techne* is to tie it to an attitude toward art (though also to connect it with what we are more likely to think of when we think of technology—people disappointed at the end of fascism in Italy have been known to repeat that under Mussolini the trains ran on time) that sees it, first and foremost, as mythmaker. The making of myth is the foundation of the State, and so the mythmaker (though not a politician) plays an archi-political role. In Lacoue-Labarthe's discussion, this turns to the West's history of attributing power to artists (particularly poets) that makes them objects of fear. And both the power and the fear are particularly concentrated in Greek

thought, where "the West" begins, in the hands of tragic poets—in the theater. Theater was and is a critical site vis-a-vis politics, and that makes it politically imperative to contain it (and artistically imperative to resist containment). When Plato imaginatively expels the "poets" and (according to a probably apocryphal story) ritually burns his own tragic poems, he contains poetry in a way replicated by Goebbels, for whom the statesman is the ultimate artist (89).

Heidegger identifies politics as the "*da*" of *dasein*—but *Sein* comes to be in *Sage*, and *Sage*, for Heidegger, is the work of the poet. Despite Heidegger's insistence that this Sage is not the heroic saga of Wagner or Nazism, Lacoue-Labarthe cannot see it as anything other than a translation of *muthos*. And therein lies the problem. The "idea" of politics is myth. To identify the poem with myth is to put it in the business of founding the State by voicing its *idea*—a position that is simultaneously powerful and dangerous. It effectively assigns to poetry the task of creating new gods (an immaculate conception of the State); and, while, in Heidegger's account, it does this in the name of philosophy, when it does it, it abandons thought.

Lacoue-Labarthe joins earlier thinkers, especially Benjamin, in grappling with this abandonment of thought; and he does it in response to Wagnerian Romanticism as much as to Heidegger. He points to what he calls the "privatization" of poetry (33) in this process—a turn that may help sharpen the often diffuse repudiation of "confessional" poetry. If Lacoue-Labarthe is right, *privatization*, not *confession,* is the problem (and we can point to someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer as evidence that confession could ground resistance to Nazism). Pushed to its limit, privatization comes to resemble an entirely inarticulate solipsism that, rather than saying nothing (in the sense employed by John Cage), simply babbles self-interested assent. It has nothing to say, but it cannot say it; and so it says "yes."

Lacoue-Labarthe's answer to this (and his answer, more generally, to Heidegger) draws on Benjamin's assertion that "the idea of poetry is prose" (36), closely connected with his invocation of "the courage of poetry" (54). Prose, he maintains, is another name for "sobriety" in Benjamin (58); to put it forward as the idea of poetry is to demand that poetry get *serious*. Obviously, that is not a call for poetry to abandon joy and passion or to become somber and morose, nor, as Lacoue-Labarthe notes, is it a call to abandon versification. It is a call for poetry to return from mythmaking to the aim Adorno said it shares with philosophy, *Wahrheitsgehalt* (46). This discussion takes form in a chapter Lacoue-Labarthe names *il faut*, and continues to the end—through "The Courage of Poetry" and an epilogue on "The Spirit of National Socialism and Its Destiny." Placing the discussion of Heidegger's Hölderlin under the sign of "it is necessary" sheds significant light on poetry by raising some of the most urgent concerns of those who resisted Nazism. Theologically, for the Confessing Church in Germany, the central question in confronting Hitler was how to rightly divide what was necessary from what was *adiaphoron*. And, if Adorno was correct, philosophy and poetry abandoned their vocation to the extent that they failed to discern the distinction. Lacoue-Labarthe's difficult apprenticeship includes coming to realize (in language close to that of the Barmen Declaration) that fascism wins when philosophers and poets *en masse* embrace the State as *necessary*.

To the extent that the logic of "the West" advances the "reason" of State as necessary, it compels both poet and philosopher, in Lacoue-Labarthe's reading, to be *martyrs* of truth (71). That is simply to recall the meaning of the Greek term, though the twentieth century provides substantial evidence that being a witness of truth may be as dangerous as the English use of the term "martyr" implies—and the twenty-first is already on its way to providing more.

In the end, Lacoue-Labarthe recalls that "Heidegger's testamentary statement, his last word" was that '*Nur ein Gott kann uns noch retten*'." Coupled with Heidegger's anemic "disappointment" with Nazism, that chilling assertion "constitutes or configures...the hope of a religion. Through which we might perceive, at the bedrock of the 'totalitarianisms,' the restoration...of religion *tout court*" (92)--another matter, as Lacoue-Labarthe says, one "we will not find our way out of...without further examination."

Lacoue-Labarthe's testamentary statement is that we must. And that sets a formidable task for poets and philosophers as martyrs of truth in a world awash in religion tout court. To say the least.

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